Beyond the Terror

Essays in French Regional and Social History, 1794–1815

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 1983
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 82-25508

ISBN 0 521 25114 1 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89382 8 paperback

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I

Cobb and the historians

MARTYN LYONS

'Mr Cobb's real subject is anarchy.'

(Norman Hampson, *English Historical Review*, 80 (1965), 363)

Present-day scholars who approach the history of France, and especially the history of the French Revolution, must negotiate three main ideological currents: first, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of empiricism, of which Richard Cobb provides an eccentric example; secondly, the French Marxist tradition of historiography; and thirdly, the influence (some would now say the imperialistic influence) of the *Annales* school. This triangular definition of the forces in play is, of course, a crude one, which shelters many exceptions. Anglo-Saxon Marxist historians do exist, but George Rudé seems in this respect a lonely example of a very rare species, occasionally sighted by careful readers of *History Workshop* or *Social History*. French historians are not necessarily Marxists or Annalists: Professor Jacques Godechot of Toulouse is one who has successfully managed to dodge the cross-fire. When, however, the student surveys the historiography of the French Revolution to consider general interpretations and approaches to research, these three influences appear to dominate the field.

Most British historians of the Revolution would be horrified to be told that they belonged to a school of thought. This might suggest to them that their individuality had been infringed, their personal integrity somehow compromised, their intellectual privacy violated. In recognition of these prickly susceptibilities, I refer not to an English or an Anglo-Saxon school, but to an Anglo-Saxon tradition. It is a tradition which envisages historical writing as a literary pursuit, and which abhors theoretical discussions and analytical systems. In one reviewer's phrase, it has exhibited the 'native passion for unadulterated facts'.[1] It has specialised in dismantling hypotheses and criticising general interpretations. Professor Alfred Cobban turned this

[1] J. Harris in *Social History*, 5, no. 3 (1980), 487.

'revisionist' technique against the Marxist school in his short and controversial book that is well-remembered in France for its polemic against the theory of the bourgeois nature of the French Revolution.[2] The Cobban tradition is currently being regenerated by William Doyle, who approaches the history of the Revolution from the traditional and conservative perspective of the Parlement of Bordeaux.[3]

Theodore Zeldin's recent history of modern France belongs, despite some appearances, to the same tradition.[4] For all its innovative attempts at a history of social psychology, it remains a rather disconnected mass of detail and insights, challenging accepted views, sometimes arranging material in an exciting way, but declining to offer a general synthesis or argument to give coherence to the 2,000-page text. It is a long, invertebrate sort of animal, and the publishers have had little difficulty in cutting it into segments to form separate volumes under the alluring general title of the *Histoire des passions françaises*.[5]

The French Marxist school, by contrast, has a greater unity and a more readily recognisable historiographical tradition. Closely associated with the *Société des études robespierristes*, and its journal, the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, French Marxist historians of the Revolution recognise Georges Lefebvre and Albert Mathiez as their intellectual ancestors. The Marxist tradition, however, goes back further, to Jean Jaurès and his pioneering attempt to write the first socialist history of the French Revolution.[6] The works of Jaurès and Mathiez, of Soboul and Rudé illustrate the fertility and vigour of the Marxist inspiration, which has produced a greater awareness of the historical importance of social class, and profitably explored the nature of popular radicalism in the French Revolution.[7] Yet the Marxist school is accused of narrow sectarianism, of intellectual rigidity, of a lack of imagination, and a disheartening tendency to repeat worn-out slogans – in short, the entire critical arsenal used against the 'old left' by hostile caricaturists since at least 1968.

The Annalists are not chiefly interested either in dissolving theoretical constraints, or in examining the social bases of revolutionary political struggles. They are more concerned with 'la longue durée', with the underlying social and mental structures of French society before and after the Revolution. The Annalists have exploited the enormous gap in socio-

[2] *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964).

[3] Notably in 'Was there an aristocratic reaction in pre-revolutionary France?', *Past and Present*, 57 (1972), 97–122; and *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980).

[4] *France, 1848–1945* (2 vols., Oxford, 1973–7).

[5] Published in 5 vols. by Recherches (1978–9), and subsequently by Seuil (1980), under this title.

[6] J. Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (8 vols., Paris, 1922–4).

[7] E.g. A. Mathiez, *La vie chère et le mouvement social sous la Terreur* (Paris, 1927); A. Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'An II* (Paris, 1959); G. Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* Oxford, 1959).

cultural history left by the more politically orientated Marxists. They have preferred the history of crime and poverty, the history of education and literacy, of birth control and abandoned children, to the more traditional concerns, like the policies of the Girondins or the strategies of Robespierre. Studying social and cultural change over a long period, however, has tended to undermine the political significance of the revolutionary events themselves, and historians like François Furet have repeatedly fallen foul of Marxist critics for underplaying the historical significance of jacobinism.

The three currents outlined above have innumerable points of contact. Furet's attacks on the Marxist 'catechism' distantly echo Cobban's anti-Marxist approach.[8] The triangular situation has produced some strange alliances and some blistering polemic. The Marxist spokesman Claude Mazauric accused Furet of being unpatriotic and anti-French in his interpretation of the Revolution.[9] Olwen Hufton found Cobb's *Police and the People* was a manifesto against the quantifiers and systematisers, 'those who would squeeze men into the restricting corset of sociological categories, would prod them into a convenient group philosophy, would pinch them when they forgot to act out their ineluctable social role of opposition to the bourgeoisie and would minimize their brutality in order to make them more intrinsically worthy to inherit the earth, their political destiny'.[10] If Richard Cobb's personal contribution to the history of France is to be assessed objectively, he must be placed not only in the context of this short-sighted rhetoric, but also in relation to the main trends in the historiography of France already outlined. Cobb's history remains unique – inspiring, exhilarating and infuriating all at once – but his main concerns do have something in common with Marxists, Annalists and Cobbanites. What follows is an attempt to define this uniqueness, and to situate Cobb in relation to the work of past and present professional historians at a time when he has acquired a wide general readership, when he is eulogised as the Breughel or the Goya of the historical profession,[11] and when every Cobb publication seems to acquire the status of a literary event. This is a disconcerting development, for it is occurring just as these publications are becoming slimmer and slimmer, and the proportion of footnotes within them correspondingly larger. How does he do it? Loved by publishers, praised by the lay public, where does Cobb stand with the historians?

Cobb would probably deny that he offers any significant innovations in historical methodology. He is, on the contrary, suspicious of all methodologies, inclined to denounce historians who attempt a 'scientific' analysis of

[8] F. Furet, 'Le catéchisme révolutionnaire', *Annales E.S.C.* (1971).

[9] C. Mazauric, *Sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1970), p. 60.

[10] Review in *English Historical Review*, 86 (1971), 802–4.

[11] Brueghel according to Hufton, ibid.; (10), Goya according to Gwyn Williams; and see *Times Higher Education Supplement* (1.8.80), 7.

general historical problems, the quantifiers, the social scientists, anyone who dares to propose 'models' instead of 'suggesting hypotheses' in the traditional phraseology. General problems do not concern Cobb; he has never and will never participate in the grand debate on The Causes of the French Revolution. 'For myself,' he has written, 'history has never been an intellectual debate.'[12] In Cobb's historical anti-method, what matters is the individual, and he or she is best understood, not by graphs and models, but through historical imagination and intuition.

In a sense, Cobb has something in common with the late Professor Cobban. Intentionally or not, both helped to undermine existing orthodoxies, challenge previous assumptions, to confound simple explanations and blur easy distinctions. In *The Police and the People*, Cobb provided a picture of the *sans-culotte* movement, including its attitudes to violence and to the crucial problem of food shortages.[13] In contrast to the more schematic social analysis of popular movements of Rudé and Soboul, Cobb's version gives us well-rounded historical personages, placed precisely in an authentic setting. Cobb's writings on the *sans-culotterie* do not lead to any abstract, generalised conclusions; but they beat with the authentic rhythm of popular life. The *sans-culotte* movement is portrayed as a frail and above all fragmented phenomenon. Soboul's overall scheme is dissolved by Cobb's profusion of detail and the geographical complexities he gives to *sans-culotte* militancy. Seeking a synthesis, Cobb felt, would produce bad history: 'my subject is chaotic, and I may well have written about it chaotically'.[14]

It is more rewarding, then, for Cobb to explore variety rather than to establish patterns, and to emphasise accidental factors rather than to expose the determinism of structures (in the *Annales* fashion). Chaos is more interesting than order, even if it is less digestible. But Cobb's claim to work in an 'impressionistic', or 'pointillistic' way should deceive no one. Cobb's *sans-culotte* is the product of a powerful historical imagination; he is nevertheless the outcome of very close and precise observation of the details of his private life, his social habits, the rhythm of his work and leisure. Detailed information on the regular itineraries and daily routine of the urban poor is not just provided by guesswork; it is plundered from the records of policemen, judges and administrators in the rich archival resources of provincial France. Fundamentally this is what distinguishes Cobb from Cobban and what constitutes his greatest contribution to the study of French history today. For what Cobb writes is based on a wealth of documentary erudition. This is why French scholars may vilify Cobban *ad nauseam*, and yet retain a profound respect for Cobb's early books, for his knowledge of the French archives of the revolutionary period is without parallel. Furthermore, if

[12] *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (London, 1969), p. 17.

[13] *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford, 1970).

[14] Ibid., p. xvii.

English-speaking historians are now to be encountered in the archives not only of Bordeaux, Lyon, Toulouse and Marseille, but also in St Flour and Vannes, Privas and Epinal, this is in no small way attributable to the lasting influence of Cobb on the study of French history. Cobb's anti-method may claim to be impressionistic, but paradoxically it is based on exhaustive research.

If one searches in Cobb's work for a positive contribution to historical method, one must first cross the barrier imposed by his insistent denial of systems, models, and World-Views (I borrow the derisive capital letters often used by Cobb). Once one has passed this rhetorical minefield, one begins to discern a distinctively Cobbian technique, an approach to historical investigation which almost amounts to a method and, beyond that, something which the barrage of abuse has camouflaged in vain: a very personal philosophy of history.

Cobb, for example, has shown how to extract the most from the rich resources of police records, used as a source for the history of popular protest. The first section of *The Police and the People* is devoted to a discussion of a methodological problem – how to interpret police evidence.[15] The historian must beware of police informers who have a vested professional interest in inventing conspiracies, with a multitude of suspects and infinite ramifications. This was especially true in the Terror of prison stooges, who bartered information in return for their release (or so they hoped). Yet the police provide a privileged historical source. Just as Inspector Maigret could penetrate and predict the assumptions and ambitions of the Parisian *petite bourgeoisie*, so the police of eighteenth-century France had a close acquaintance with the popular milieu in which they worked. They knew in detail the social topography of their 'beat', they knew the local meeting-place and who they were likely to find there, they knew which categories of workers were most likely to commit what crimes, and they were immediately suspicious if their routine surroundings were disturbed by some one or some thing new. The police, of course, had certain deep-rooted prejudices or convictions: that river-workers were habitually violent, for instance, or that anyone in a nomadic occupation, from bargee to *colporteur*, was always a prime suspect. Time and time again, they would repeat the order of the policeman at the end of the film *Casablanca*: 'round up all the usual suspects'. The police were creatures of habit, but Cobb has used their dossiers to great effect as a source for the social history of the urban poor.

Simenon's Inspector Maigret is an example to which Cobb often refers to illustrate the possibilities which the police offer a social historian. Simenon describes Cobb's Paris, the Paris of the 1930s and 1940s, before La Défense and the Autoroute du Nord, the Tour Montparnasse and the gentrification

[15] Ibid., pt I, 'The sources of French popular history and their interpretation'.

of the Marais. He describes a social stratum of ordinary people with whom Cobb is also familiar. Maigret's world is principally a *petit bourgeois* world of *petits patrons*, concierges, widows, salesmen, office workers and garage mechanics, a world of people like the artisan-jeweller Célérin, making elegant brooches in his little workshop high up in the Rue de Sévigné, a *sans-culotte* surviving into the 1970s.[16] Simenon, like Cobb, is a close observer of the social habits of these characters. Called to the scene of the crime, Maigret instinctively tries to assemble a mental picture of the surroundings and acquaintances of the victim. Cobb attempted a similar exercise, for Parisian suicides in the 1790s, in *Death in Paris*.[17] When Maigret, however, is summoned to the Hotel Georges V, he feels like a fish out of water amongst Italian countesses and English playboys. He is uneasy because he cannot apply his instinctive knowledge of his own familiar universe.[18] So Cobb too prefers to leave to other historians the analysis of the mentality of Louis XVI's court, or the nobility of the Bourbon Restoration, for this is not his 'beat'. Maigret, like the eighteenth-century police, was an observer of the predictable, 'a historian', as Cobb called him, 'of the déjà vu'.[19]

Simenon's books are perhaps not quite as reassuring as Cobb would have them be. His stories expose the personal secrets behind the façade of normality, respectability, the steady job and the apparently happy marriage. Behind reassuring appearances are individuals liable to commit violent acts; suicide, blackmail and even murder, in the defence of wounded pride, family ambition, revenge or out of sexual jealousy. The predictable social round is sometimes a hypocritical pretence to hide some very nasty domestic skeletons. As a result, Simenon's books often leave a bitter and depressing after-taste, which seems quite alien to Cobb's effervescent optimism.

Two further elements of Cobb's approach must be discussed as distinctive features of his historiographical contribution. One is his use of the individual case-history; the other his sense of place and his insistence on the importance of the physical environment. The popular movements discussed by Cobb are firmly rooted in, and indeed conditioned by, their particular geographical surroundings. In *Reactions to the French Revolution*, for instance, Cobb evokes the townscape of revolutionary Lyon, with its many bridges for dumping corpses, its suburbs for hiding fugitives, and the underground cellars and ruins which protected clandestine bands of criminals and counter-revolutionary assassins.[20] Cobb is not alone in paying so much attention to the physical environment. In France, history and geography were for long considered closely allied disciplines, and the philosophy of the *Annales* school attributed

[16] G. Simenon, *Les Innocents* (Paris, 1972). [17] *Death in Paris, 1795–1801* (Oxford, 1978).

[18] G. Simenon, *Maigret voyage* (Paris, 1958) and, e.g., *Maigret et l'affaire Nahour* (Paris, 1967).

[19] See 'Maigret's Paris' in *Tour de France* (London, 1976), p. 182.

[20] *Reactions to the French Revolution*, 'Counter-revolution and environment: the example of Lyon' (London, 1972).

great importance to placing societies in their geographical context. But Cobb's approach to place is not that of a Le Roy Ladurie, whose *Paysans de Languedoc* included a chapter on the history of its vegetation;[21] neither is it that of traditional French local studies, often introduced by massively detailed surveys of the pattern of landownership and population distribution.[22] For Cobb is not just situating the action in a certain socio-economic context; for him the place and its intimate geography are 'the ingredients of a collective mentality'.[23] The high buildings of Lyon overshadowed streets which were deep, dark and sinister-looking. The whole personality of the city was sinister and secretive. The steep hillside created a different *quartier* at every level, cut off from its neighbours by the gradient. It was thus a city penetrated only with difficulty by the outsider, in which individual districts and suburbs had a remarkably self-sufficient and closed character. Cobb is not just describing a place – he is illustrating a violent, secretive and xenophobic local mentality.

Cobb's emphasis on 'the sense of place' is therefore an element both in his analysis of popular attitudes and in his contribution to French provincial history. Cobb's insistence on the geographical fragmentation of the *sans-culotte* movement has already been mentioned. In fact, all national political movements, when examined by Cobb, tend to dissolve into inter-village rivalries, longstanding feuds at the level of province, town or suburb, or at the level of individual personalities. It is precisely on this world of small towns and villages that he concentrates. 'My history,' Cobb has written, 'is not French history, but French provincial history: Lyonnais history, Norman history, Lille history, Paris history.'[24] *Les armées révolutionnaires* teems with examples of small-town jealousies and prejudices.[25] The *armées* are described as instruments of provincial terror, sent on punitive forays to assure both the food supplies and political dominance of the local urban *sans-culottes*.[26] In the hands of unscrupulous local militants, they are used, too, to settle old scores against ancient enemies. For a few months, the *armées révolutionnaires* enjoyed almost unlimited powers, requisitioning supplies and carrying out political repression in their own local spheres. They were part of that revolutionary anarchy which is Cobb's perennial theme, and which he describes so anarchically.

One of Cobb's main contributions, then, is to have municipalised the history of the Revolution. French provincial historians generally prefer, as their frame of reference, an economic region, a department or an old regime province. Cobb's influence has been rather towards studies of cities such as

[21] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 'La civilisation végétale' (2 vols., Paris, 1966).

[22] One recent example is G. Frêche, *Toulouse et la région Midi-Pyrénées au siècle des lumières, vers 1670–1789* (Paris, 1974).

[23] *Reactions*, p. 56.

[24] *Second Identity*, p. 50.

[25] *Les armées révolutionnaires* (2 vols., Paris, 1961–3).

[26] Ibid., esp. vol. 2.

Bordeaux, Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse. His emphasis on place has usually meant concentration on an exclusively urban environment. The particularities of terrorism are discussed town by town in the *Armées révolutionnaires*: Bordeaux terrorism reflects the cosmopolitain, commercial population of a great sea-port, while in a garrison town like Lille, soldiers make a large contribution to terrorist militancy.[27] In an article typically entitled 'Quelques conséquences sociales de la Révolution dans un milieu urbain', the response of Lille artisans to the upheaval of the urban economy is analysed. Jewellers, and other artisans in luxury trades, sought refuge in the military administration, as did shoemakers and metal-workers, whose leather and iron was requisitioned by the army. *Petits commerçants* threatened by the effects of war (closure of traditional markets, shortage of raw materials, conscription of the labour force) looked to revolutionary institutions to provide an alternative source of livelihood. What counts for Cobb, here as elsewhere, is urban society and the urban landscape. The historian must learn to appreciate, then, the individual character of each town. 'A great deal of Paris eighteenth-century, of Lyon nineteenth-century, history,' wrote Cobb, 'can be walked, seen, and above all heard, in small restaurants ,on the platform at the back of a bus, in cafés, or on the park bench.'[28]

This municipalisation of French history is justified in a society like eighteenth-century France, where a substantial proportion of the population lived in small agglomerations. The Revolution was largely inspired by small-town lawyers and officials, whose traditional universe was no bigger than Robespierre's native town of Arras. The political structure of the Revolutionary Government in the Year II strengthened the administration of the large towns, or at least of the districts, at the expense of the more conservative or federalist-inclined departmental administrations. In addition, the whole problem of food supplies and shortages compels study at this local level. The vexed *problème des subsistences* was essentially one of communal egoism, with towns competing with each other and with the demands of the army for precious grain supplies. From all these points of view, the municipal perspective is a correct one.

But what about the peasantry? The countryside rarely appears in Cobb's history, except as either a stamping-ground for bandits, or else through the antagonistic eyes of the hungry urban *sans-culotterie*. Cobb once lamented that historians in general had been slow to follow the lead of Georges Lefebvre in studying peasant history. Only recently have the Marxists taken up the history of the peasantry once again,[29] while, in a series of articles, Peter Jones has adopted a Cobb-inspired approach in studying the villages of the

[27] Ibid., pp. 334–58. [28] *Second Identity*, pp. 19–20.

[29] A. Soboul, *Problèmes paysans de la Révolution, 1789–1848* (Paris, 1976); F. Gauthier, 'Sur les problèmes paysans de la Révolution', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 232 (1978), 305–14.

Massif Central.[30] In Cobb's own preoccupations, however, the peasant seems principally an object of prejudice and contempt in the mental universe of the urban classes. In *Les armées révolutionnaires*, the countryside is a hostile and suspicious world, in which the *sans-culotte* militia feels isolated and afraid. Its reaction (a mixture of hatred, panic and exasperation) is to shock the uncooperative peasant as brutally as possible. Hence the smashing of holy relics, the abusive mimicry of religious rituals, the blasphemy and iconoclasm, with which the impotent urban *sans-culottes* deliberately offended the peasantry's religious susceptibilities.

An even better example of the town/country conflict in Cobb may be found in *Paris and its Provinces*, a book foreshadowed, like so many of the others, by an earlier article in *Terreur et subsistances*.[31] Cobb's subject here is 'the geography of mistrust', the mutual hatred and suspicion which poisoned relations between Parisians and the inhabitants of the out-lying villages. Mistrust is an understatement, for Cobb analyses something stronger which he calls 'a permanent form of a *grande peur*', the Parisians' traditional and visceral fear of the surrounding communes, where enemies lurked, and innocent weekenders might be shot for infringing the country code. The surroundings of Paris, however, are seen chiefly through the eyes of government spies and the jacobin club of Belleville. From this perspective, Villejuif and Vaugirard, Gentilly, Fontenay-aux-Roses and Carrières-sous-Charenton formed a hostile jungle, inhabited by sullen, inbred and isolated communities, which were quick to identify outsiders from the capital. It is suggested that the attitudes of the Paris Commune of 1871 to the army of the Versaillais, as well as the political crisis of ventôse–germinal Year II, may be seen in the light of this recurrent fear of the dark, tribal lands on the periphery of Paris.

The sense of place is then strongest in an urban environment. With Cobb, one is tempted to go further. If one is to define Cobb's own 'territory of the historian',[32] it must be not just the French provincial town, but the *quartier*. It is at the micro-level of the street or neighbourhood that Cobb's gifts find their fullest expression. In *The Streets of Paris*, Cobb patrolled popular Paris on foot, like a modern-day Restif de la Bretonne, peering into courtyards and examining graffiti.[33] Unlike Restif, however, he was accompanied by a

[30] P. Jones, 'The rural bourgeoisie of the southern Massif Central: a contribution to the study of the social structure of *ancien régime* France', *Social History*, 4 (1979), 65–83; '*La République au village* in the southern Massif Central, 1789–1799', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), 793–812; and also 'Political commitment and rural society in the southern Massif Central', *European Studies Review*, 10 (1980), 337–56.

[31] *Paris and its Provinces, 1792–1802* (London, 1975), esp. ch. 4; *Terreur et subsistance* (Paris, 1965) 'Le complot militaire de ventôse an II'.

[32] The title of a collection of essays by E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien* (2 vols., Paris 1973–8).

[33] *The Streets of Paris*, with photographs by Nicholas Breach (London, 1980).

perceptive photographer. In spite of its title, the book was a photographic study not of the whole capital, but of a few *quartiers* including, notably one in Belleville (20^{e} *arrondissement*), and another near the canal Saint Martin (10^{e}) Cobb was hunting for the remains of a nineteenth-century world of small workshops and *boutiques*, the traditional urban 'village', unspoilt by pizzeria, antique shops, expensive restaurants and, his constant *bête noire*, the fashionable intellectual. He and his companion were trying to record the intimate scale of the Parisian neighbourhood.

For Cobb, the successful French historian must mark out his own *quartier*, as a social, economic and political unity. Parisian sectional politics in the Revolution were managed at the level of the *quartier*, and through them, the local *juge de paix* and the occasional unneighbourly denunciation, one can reconstruct French social life at street level. If the historian knows who lives where, who is employed in which workshop, if he can penetrate the networks of kinship, professional ties and local loyalties, then he is better able to understand and predict social behaviour and political commitment. In Cobb's view, the successful historian of France must establish his *quartier*, know its *habitués*, discover its secret itineraries, and he must himself become a familiar figure in the landscape, if only as M. l'Anglais, Le Gallois (I will answer these days to L'Australien). In theory, it takes a knowledge of colloquial French, a friendly disposition and regular drinking habits. A bonus qualification would be an ability to handle avaricious, inquisitive and racialist concierges, from whom so much local information can be gleaned, as it no doubt was by the ancien regime police.

After the sense of place, the most striking aspect of Cobb's historical approach is the use of individual case-histories. Whereas George Rudé is concerned to elucidate the general characteristics of the revolutionary crowd, Cobb tries to atomise the crowd into a host of individual faces, with private biographies, which illuminate the history of the Revolution from unexpected angles.[34] In *Les armées révolutionnaires*, this approach is used to give us the details of the careers of leading and second-rank *sans-culotte* militants, like Ronsin, Momoro and Grammont.[35] Officers of the *armées*, according to Cobb, were typically sons of artisans, who had enrolled in a military career at the time of the Seven Years' War, bought themselves out in the 1780s, arrived in Paris as clerks or *petits commerçants*, and joined the National Guard before enlisting in the *armée révolutionnaire* of the capital. They were mature married men who, by 1793, had already participated in several revolutionary *journées*. The sources of their political commitment lay not only in class hatred or attachment to radical ideologies, but also in a wide range of different, and very personal, motives. They were after 'le bon temps', 'le pillage gastronomique', good wages and farm girls, or else the uniform

[34] Rudé, *The Crowd*.

[35] *Armées révolutionnaires*, vol. 1, 'L'Armée parisienne'.

simply flattered their vanity.[36] This approach makes it very difficult to generalise about the *sans-culotte* movement which, as we have seen, Cobb has already splintered into a myriad different geographical units. The *sans-culotterie* instead appears as

> a mere *agglomérat* of negative attitudes and prejudices, of crude fears, of collective antipathies, of shared and accepted patterns of violence, and of violent solutions, of a range of personalities extending from the semi-literate Breton market porter or Aveyronnais water-carrier, to the sophisticated but embittered *clerc de procureur*, the self-satisfied, domineering building contractor, the successful grocer, and the much respected, wise doctor . . .[37]

The *sans-culotterie* is made to come alive but, at the same time, it loses its coherence.

In *Les armées révolutionnaires*, Cobb's personal biographies were constructive because they concerned men who played an important political role in the Revolution, and because he attempted to give a picture of the typical militant. In later works, he has turned to much more marginal personalities, abandoned attempts to describe general or typical characteristics, and indulged his taste for the bizarre and anarchic characters of the period. This tendency was quite clear in *Reactions to the French Revolution*, although this book did contain perhaps the finest example of Cobb's use of the individual case-history, in his account (based on a book review) of the obscure militant Guénot.[38]

The personal biography of Guénot begins on the river Yonne, where he worked in the very dangerous log-rolling trade in the violent company of the *flotteurs de bois*, who brought timber down-river to Paris. So far, Guénot can illustrate two general points. First, he was engaged in a trade which involved frequent contact with Paris, and this may have been an important factor in his radicalisation. Secondly, his resentment against his employers, the rich timber-merchants of the Yonne, may allow us to place his militancy against the background of a kind of class conflict. Cobb noted this, but he found Guénot interesting largely for other reasons: his tendency to violence, and the wild, desperate consequences of his revolutionary involvement. Guénot stayed in Paris, enlisted in the Gardes Françaises, where he was noted for bouts of insolence and brawling which often landed him in prison. He was employed by the police in the district of the Palais-Royal, where he mixed with an underworld of prostitutes, gamblers and counterfeiters. He was eventually employed by the Committee of General Security, which entrusted him with the arrest of the poet André Chénier, and several large timber-merchants (thus he was able to settle accounts with his old masters

[36] Ibid., pp. 181–2, 194.
[37] *Reactions*, p. 117.
[38] Ibid., ch. 3, 'The biographical approach and the personal case history'.

and exploiters). He somehow survived the Thermidorean period but, in the Consulate, he was sent back to his home department, where he suffered the vengeful persecutions of his local acquaintances. Hounded by a vindictive local community, Guénot took to the woods where for years he lived like a hermit, finding whatever sustenance he could in the forests, which had once provided him with a very different sort of livelihood. Guénot, for Cobb, illustrates the whole history of the Revolution, not because he exemplifies a class conflict inherent in the emergence of the *sans-culotterie*, but because he used the Revolution to satisfy personal grudges, and because of the way in which his local community turned against him afterwards, evoking 'the everlasting memories of rural vengeance'.[39] 'Guénot', for Cobb, 'was the product of a society, of a place and of a trade.' Above all, his career was one in which private resentments merged indistinguishably with public policy.

Cobb's chapter on Guénot provides perhaps the most vivid justification for the individual biographical approach when handled by a historian of sensitivity and imagination. There are times, however, when the justification is not so obvious. *Death in Paris*, for instance, was a rather slight and indulgent book, which attracted a general consensus of applause. One critic, at any rate, was sober enough to find it 'overpraised'.[40] In it, Cobb attempts a post-mortem reconstruction of private lives from personal debris and minutiae. Cobb reassembles the evidence of violent death recorded in the Basse-Geôle of Paris under the Directory. The aim is to reconstruct the individual lives of the desperate Parisian poor from their corpses, bruised, deformed, or bandaged, from their few possessions, tattered clothes and the brief recollections of acquaintances. The result is a brilliant piece of historical detective work, leading apparently nowhere. The dangers of Cobb's very personal approach seem to be clearly exposed: the love of detail for its own sake, the deliberate refusal to place material in a general historical context and the tendency to reduce history to a string of anecdotes, whose significance escapes most readers.

Cobb has turned to a study of those obscure and often untraceable characters who lived on the margins of French society, just as they have lived in the margins of historical writing to date. The criminals, beggars, prostitutes and the insane are now brought onto the centre of the page, as it were, not so much to explore the workings of society as a whole, but because their private odysseys are regarded as valuable in their own right. With *Death in Paris*, this is carried to an extreme where few could, or would want to, follow. For Cobb has ceased to be a historian of the French Revolution. He has become, instead, a chronicler of the lives of the poor, who happened to be alive at the time of the Revolution. One chapter of *Reactions to the French Revolution* is

[39] Ibid., p. 91.
[40] *Death in Paris*, reviewed in *Social History*, 5 (1980), 449.